

**MODERN PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE THOMAS WALTHER COLLECTION  
PREMIERES MoMA'S EXTRAORDINARY COLLECTION OF EARLY 20TH CENTURY  
PHOTOGRAPHS**

**Exhibition Coincides with the Culmination of the Thomas Walther Collection Project, a  
Four-Year Research Collaboration Between MoMA's Curatorial and Conservation Staff**

***Modern Photographs from the Thomas Walther Collection, 1909–1949***

December 13, 2014–April 19, 2015

The Edward Steichen Photography Galleries, third floor

**Press Viewing Hour:** Wednesday, December 10, 9:30 to 10:30 a.m.

**NEW YORK, December 4, 2014—*Modern Photographs from the Thomas Walther Collection, 1909–1949***, on view from December 13, 2014, to April 19, 2015, explores photography between the First and Second World Wars, when creative possibilities were never richer or more varied, and when photographers approached figuration, abstraction, and architecture with unmatched imaginative fervor. This vital moment is dramatically captured in the photographs that constitute the Thomas Walther Collection, a remarkable group of works presented together for the first time through nearly 300 photographs. Made on the street and in the studio, intended for avant-garde exhibitions or the printed page, these objects provide unique insight into the radical intentions of their creators. Iconic works by such towering figures as Berenice Abbott, Karl Blossfeldt, Alvin Langdon Coburn, El Lissitzky, Lucia Moholy, László Moholy-Nagy, Aleksandr Rodchenko, and Paul Strand are featured alongside lesser-known treasures by more than 100 other practitioners. The exhibition is organized by Quentin Bajac, the Joel and Anne Ehrenkranz Chief Curator of Photography, and Sarah Hermanson Meister, Curator, Department of Photography, MoMA.

The exhibition coincides with ***Object:Photo. Modern Photographs: The Thomas Walther Collection 1909–1949***, the result of a four-year collaborative project between the Museum's departments of Photography and Conservation, with the participation of over two dozen leading international photography scholars and conservators, making it the most extensive effort to integrate conservation, curatorial, and scholarly research efforts on photography to date. That project is composed of multiple parts including a website that features a suite of digital-visualization research tools that allow visitors to explore the collection, a hard-bound paper catalogue of the entire Thomas Walther collection, and an interdisciplinary symposium focusing on ways in which the digital age is changing our engagement with historic photographs.

*Modern Photographs from the Thomas Walther Collection, 1909–1949*, is organized thematically into six sections, suggesting networks between artists, regions, and objects, and highlighting the figures whose work Walther collected in depth, including André Kertész, Germaine Krull, Franz Roh, Willi Ruge, Maurice Tabard, Umbo, and Edward Weston. Enriched by key works

in other mediums from MoMA's collection, this exhibition presents the exhilarating story of a landmark chapter in photography's history.

### ***The Modern World***

Even before the introduction of the handheld Leica camera in 1925, photographers were avidly exploring fresh perspectives, shaped by the unique experience of capturing the world through a lens and ideally suited to express the tenor of modern life in the wake of World War I. Looking up and down, these photographers found unfamiliar points of view that suggested a new, dynamic visual language freed from convention. Improvements in the light sensitivity of photographic films and papers meant that photographers could capture motion as never before. At the same time, technological advances in printing resulted in an explosion of opportunities for photographers to present their work to ever-widening audiences. From inexpensive weekly magazines to extravagantly produced journals, periodicals exploited the potential of photographs and imaginative layouts, not text, to tell stories. Among the photographers on view in this section are Martin Munkácsi (American, born Hungary, 1896–1963), Leni Riefenstahl (German, 1902–2003), Aleksandr Rodchenko (Russian, 1891–1956), and Willi Ruge (German, 1882–1961).

### ***Purisms***

The question of whether photography ought to be considered a fine art was hotly contested from its invention in 1839 into the 20th century. Beginning in the 1890s, in an attempt to distinguish their efforts from hoards of Kodak-wielding amateurs and masses of professionals, "artistic" photographers referred to themselves as Pictorialists. They embraced soft focus and painstakingly wrought prints so as to emulate contemporary prints and drawings, and chose subjects that underscored the ethereal effects of their methods. Before long, however, most avant-garde photographers had come to celebrate precise and distinctly photographic qualities as virtues. On both sides of the Atlantic, photographers were making this transition from Pictorialism to modernism, while occasionally blurring the distinction. Exhibition prints could be made with precious platinum or palladium, or matte surfaces that mimicked those materials. Perhaps nowhere is this variety more clearly evidenced than in the work of Edward Weston, whose suite of prints in this section suggests the range of appearances achievable with unadulterated contact prints from his large-format negatives. Other photographers on view include Karl Blossfeldt (German, 1865–1932), Manuel Álvarez Bravo (Mexican, 1902–2002), Jaromír Funke (Czech, 1896–1945), Bernard Shea Horne (American, 1867–1933), and Alfred Stieglitz (American, 1864–1946).

### ***Reinventing Photography***

In 1925, László Moholy-Nagy articulated an idea that became central to the New Vision movement: although photography had been *invented* 100 years earlier, it was only now being *discovered* by the avant-garde circles for all its aesthetic possibilities. As products of technological

culture, with short histories and no connection to the old fine-art disciplines—which many contemporary artists considered discredited—photography and cinema were seen as truly modern instruments that offered the greatest potential for transforming visual habits. From the photogram to solarization, from negative prints to double exposures, the New Vision photographers explored the medium in countless ways, rediscovering known techniques and inventing new ones. Echoing the cinematic experiments of the same period, this emerging photographic vocabulary was rapidly adopted by the advertising industry, which appreciated the visual efficiency of its bold simplicity. Florence Henri (Swiss, born America, 1893–1982), Edward Quigley (American, 1898–1977), Franz Roh (German, 1890–1965), Franciszka Themerson and Stefan Themerson (British, born Poland, 1907–1988 and 1910–1988), and František Vobecký (Czech, 1902–1991) are among the numerous photographers represented here.

### ***The Artist's Life***

Photography is particularly well suited to capturing the distinctive nuances of the human face, and photographers delighted in and pushed the boundaries of portraiture throughout the 20th century. The Thomas Walther Collection features a great number of portraits of artists and self-portraits as varied as the individuals portrayed. Additionally, the collection conveys a free-spirited sense of community and daily life, highlighted here with photographs made by André Kertész and by students and faculty at the Bauhaus. When the Hungarian-born Kertész moved to Paris in 1925, he couldn't afford to purchase photographic paper, so he would print on less expensive postcard stock. These prints, whose small scale requires that the viewer engage with them intimately, function as miniature windows into the lives of Kertész's bohemian circle of friends. The group of photographs made at the Bauhaus in the mid-1920s, before the medium was formally integrated into the school's curriculum, similarly expresses friendships and everyday life captured and printed in an informal manner. Portraits by Claude Cahun (French, 1894–1954), Lotte Jacobi (American, born Germany, 1896–1990), Lucia Moholy (British, born Czechoslovakia, 1894–1989), Man Ray (American, 1890–1976), August Sander (German, 1876–1964) and Edward Steichen (American, born Luxembourg, 1879–1973) are among the highlights of this gallery.

### ***Between Surrealism and Magic Realism***

In the mid-1920s, European artistic movements ranging from Surrealism to New Objectivity moved away from a realist approach by highlighting the strange in the familiar or trying to reconcile dreams and reality. Echoes of these concerns, centered on the human figure, can be found in this gallery. Some photographers used anti-naturalistic methods—capturing hyperreal, close-up details; playing with scale; and rendering the body as landscape—to challenge the viewer's perception. Others, in line with Sigmund Freud's definition of "the uncanny" as an effect that results from the blurring of distinctions between the real and the fantastic, offered visual plays on life and the lifeless, the animate and the inanimate, confronting the human body with

surrogates in the form of dolls, mannequins, and masks. Photographers influenced by Surrealism, such as Maurice Tabard, subjected the human figure to distortions and transformations by experimenting with photographic techniques either while capturing the image or while developing it in the darkroom. Additional photographers on view include Aenne Biermann (German, 1898–1933), Jacques-André Boiffard (French, 1902–1961), Max Burchartz (German, 1887–1961), Helmar Lerski (Swiss, 1871–1956), and Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (Polish, 1885–1939)

### ***Dynamics of the City***

In his 1928 manifesto “The Paths of Contemporary Photography,” Aleksandr Rodchenko advocated for a new photographic vocabulary that would be more in step with the pace of modern urban life and the changes in perception it implied. Rodchenko was not alone in this quest: most of the avant-garde photographers of the 1920s and 1930s were city dwellers, striving to translate the novel and shocking experience of everyday life into photographic images. Equipped with newly invented handheld cameras, they used unusual vantage points and took photos as they moved, struggling to re-create the constant flux of images that confronted the pedestrian. Reflections in windows and vitrines, blurry images of quick motions, double exposures, and fragmentary views portray the visual cacophony of the metropolis. The work of Berenice Abbott (American, 1898–1991), Alvin Langdon Coburn (American, 1882–1966), Germanie Krull (Dutch, born Germany, 1897–1985), Alexander Hackenschmied (Czech, 1907–2004), Umbo (German, 1902–1980), and Imre Kinszki (Hungarian, 1901–1945) is featured in this final gallery.

### **SPONSORSHIP:**

The Thomas Walther Collection Project is made possible by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Major support is provided by The Museum of Modern Art's Research and Scholarly Publications endowment established through the generosity of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Edward John Noble Foundation, Mr. and Mrs. Perry R. Bass, and the National Endowment for the Humanities' Challenge Grant Program; with additional funding from The John Szarkowski Publications Fund.

### **PUBLICATION:**

For extensive information on the publication *Object:Photo. Modern Photographs: The Thomas Walther Collection 1909–1949*, please see the related press release.

ISBN: 9780870709418 U.S., CDN \$75.00 Clth, 9.5 x 12"/400 pgs/473 color.

Edited with texts by Mitra Abbaspour, Lee Ann Daffner, Maria Morris Hambourg. Texts by Quentin Bajac, Jim Coddington, Ute Eskildsen, Olivier Lugon, Constance McCabe, Hanako Murata, Paul Messier, Klaus Pollmeier, and Matthew Witkovsky. The publication is available in December 2014.

### **WEBSITE:**

For extensive information on the website [MoMA.org/objectphoto](http://MoMA.org/objectphoto), launching on December 9, 2014, please see the related press release.

**SYMPOSIUM:**

For additional information on the symposium Reconsidering the Object: Approaches to Researching Interwar Photography in the Digital Age, held on December 12, at 10:00 a.m., please see the related press release.

**No. 49**

**Press contacts:** Paul Jackson, (212) 708-9593 or paul\_jackson@moma.org  
Margaret Doyle, (212) 408-6400 or margaret\_doyle@moma.org

**For downloadable high-resolution images, register at [MoMA.org/press](https://www.moma.org/press).**

\*\*\*\*\*

**Public Information:**

**The Museum of Modern Art**, 11 West 53 Street, New York, NY 10019, (212) 708-9400, [MoMA.org](https://www.moma.org).

**Hours:** Saturday through Thursday, 10:30 a.m.–5:30 p.m. Friday, 10:30 a.m.–8:00 p.m.

**Museum Admission:** \$25 adults; \$18 seniors, 65 years and over with I.D.; \$14 full-time students with current I.D. Free, members and children 16 and under. (Includes admittance to Museum galleries and film programs). Free admission during Uniqlo Free Friday Nights: Fridays, 4:00–8:00 p.m.

**MoMA.org:** No service charge for tickets ordered on [MoMA.org](https://www.moma.org). Tickets purchased online may be printed out and presented at the Museum without waiting in line. (Includes admittance to Museum galleries and film programs).